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Necessary Nerve Fatigue

Todd Goodson

As a high school freshman in 1972, I enrolled in a very traditional English I course. Then as today, high school English curriculum followed a familiar pattern—English I, English II, English III, and English IV. In that era, two years of formal study (i.e., English I and English II) were required of high school students. English III and English IV were reserved for students deemed college bound.

To provide a bit more context, I attended a small K-12 school in the rural Midwest. Grades 7-12 were staffed with two full-time English teachers. Toward the end of my freshman year, one of those teachers, my English I teacher, explained that she and her colleague (the other English teacher) had just returned from a meeting of some sort (the concept of a professional conference would have been lost on me), and they had an amazing idea that would change the way we experienced English classes during the remainder of our time in high school.

She called this new thing we were going to do “phase electives.” What this would mean, she explained, was that rather than taking English II next year as a year-long course, we would have a menu of choices, semester-length electives from which we could choose. We were still required to take a full year of English as sophomores, and we could continue to take English classes through the end of our senior years, but we would get to select from thematic choices. Even today, I recall those course titles: MASH (Mystery, Adventure, Supernatural, and Horror), Creative Writing, Short Stories, Ethnic Literature, Poetry, and Journalism.

Much later I would learn this was part of an experimental national trend in secondary English studies driven by student interest (Overton, 1955). Today I am amazed that two small town teachers were willing to invest the amount of time obviously required to create and deliver six new courses on their own time over the summer, but what I knew at the time was that it was fun! It is not an exaggeration at all to say those thematic elective courses offered in the late 1970s at that country school in Missouri led me to become a high school English teacher. The next four years at the University of Missouri I sat through my literature and writing and methodology courses thinking about how I might take what I was receiving and convert it into dynamic elective courses to inspire and energize the high school students I would soon be teaching.

That is, until my final semester before student teaching when my English teaching methods professor invited a textbook representative to speak to our class. What I remember him saying went something like this:

“Some of you might have had courses in high school that were electives. You don’t have to worry about those anymore. We got rid of them. We’ve gone back to the basics!”

Years later I would learn how much more money is to be made by publishers through formal textbook series for a sequence of English I, English II, English III, and English IV when compared to the paperbacks and trade books employed by the elective programs. Years later I would learn about the context of the late 1970s Back-to-Basics movement in public education. The English electives movement had almost entirely overtaken high school curriculum in the late

1970s, and now it has been almost entirely erased from the very consciousness of the community of English teachers and English teacher educators (Christenbury, 1980). Those secondary teachers who taught elective courses have long since retired, and I would imagine I am one of a very few people remaining on the planet who thinks much about these things.

That would not be a problem except that we risk losing a vital body of work that held enormous potential to reshape one of the core academic disciplines that every secondary student in a public high school in America experiences. A major transformation of a core academic school subject will undoubtedly ripple through society in ways we are not currently equipped to map. What we can do, however, is pay much more attention to those shining moments of innovation in our history as educators. Returning to the primary documents and reports from the time can help any number of ways. Rarely are we reinventing the wheel, even if we naively assume we are. Large widespread curricular movements such as the English elective programs do not magically appear. They emerge from a larger cultural, intellectual, pedagogical, and economic environment. It is always instructive to go back and examine those moments in schooling, as they are ripe with lessons. Certainly interesting and often powerful methods and methodologies can be found, but the dynamics leading to the creation of widespread curricular innovation are endlessly fascinating. I would follow that by noting the inevitable counter swing that so often crushes innovation is also interesting. In the case of the English electives movement, it is clear from our vantage point today those innovations were ground to dust under the force of the larger societal movement to the intellectual and cultural right. Those who would promote innovation in any age would do well to examine the past and anticipate the opposition forces that are assembling even as the innovation is being conceived.

From 2002 through 2008 I had the honor and the privilege of serving as Editor of the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, a signature publication of the organization then known as the International Reading Association (since rebranded as the International Literacy Association). In the vision statement I prepared when I applied for that position, I identified historical research as a key area I wanted to promote in the pages of the journal. During my editorial term, I gave a number of conference presentations for anyone interested in publishing in the journal. I took every opportunity to call out specifically for manuscripts reporting historical studies. I was responsible for 48 issues of the journal published over a six-year period. Naturally, I reviewed and adjudicated hundreds of manuscripts during that time period, and not only was I unable to publish a single manuscript with a historical focus, I did not have the opportunity to review and consider any such manuscripts.

This is a long-term, profound failing of K-12 education, teacher education, and education scholarship. We have systematically neglected our history, and the implications are both hidden and obvious. In this issue of *Educational Consideration*, Kay Ann Taylor has brought together a body of work that examines historical intersections of power and positionality in the work of teaching and learning. Those of us who have invested multiple decades of our lives in public education have seen more than our share of movements and counter swings. What we have not seen is a critical examination of what exactly happened—what were the unstated economic, intellectual, and political interests driving those educational movements—through the clarity that comes with the passage of time.

As one example from this issue, I would call out Mark Ellner's examination of the forces opposed to expanding opportunities for women in physical education and competitive athletics during the early 20th century. One source Ellner cites reports a set of justifications for barring access to females from competitive sports. The final point made in that list suggests that the competition would cause "unnecessary nerve fatigue."

Certainly it makes us all uncomfortable to expose the arguments of the past for critical examination today. Just as certainly, that is one reason why historical research has never had a prominent place in education scholarship. We are drawn as a profession toward the next big thing to emerge on the landscape. That is, after all, where the consulting and grant dollars are to be found, the pages in the top tier journals, the promotions, the prime slots in conference program booklets. My argument is that we rush headlong into educational trends at our peril if we cannot situate what we are doing in an historical context. That can be troubling because there is always a degree of evangelical fervor surrounding the hot trend of the moment, and the culture of schooling does not encourage critical reflection. We might say reflection that is unflinchingly critical causes nerve fatigue.

However, we owe it to our profession, our students, and to our communities to engage in deep and critical reflection of our practice, and that reflection is incomplete at best if it does not account for the historical perspective. It is my hope that this issue of *Educational Considerations* provides an example of that process.

Christenbury, L. M. (1980). *The Origin, Development, And Decline Of The Secondary English Elective Curriculum* (Order No. 8028140). Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (303086177). Retrieved from <https://er.lib.k-state.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.er.lib.k-state.edu/docview/303086177?accountid=11789>

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